

CHAPTER XXIII: THE LEGACY

When Maj. James A. Hardie took command of the Presidio of San Francisco in 1847, he could not have known that the post, then a small collection of crumbling adobes sheltered by sand hills, was destined to play a significant role in the nation's military history. The military occupation of northern California proceeded peacefully but the almost simultaneous events of a peace treaty with Mexico and the discovery of gold in California in 1848 almost brought the Presidio to a premature close. Volunteer soldiers deserted in droves for the mine fields or were mustered out of the service and the regular troops who replaced them also caught gold fever. When the year 1848 ended, the garrison's strength stood at thirteen enlisted men.

Slowly the Presidio's strength increased and in the 1850s the troops played an active role in Indian affairs not only in California but in the wars of the Pacific Northwest. Also in that decade army engineers began the construction of Fort Point, the only complete masonry American Third System fort in the coastal defenses of the West Coast. Fort Point marked the beginning of the Presidio's key role in the defenses of strategic San Francisco Bay from the Civil War, through the war with Spain, and two world wars, to the missile era a century later.

The Civil War, 1861-1865, brought a burst of activity on the reservation. The garrison strength climbed to more than 1,700 officers and men. Officers' quarters, barracks, a hospital, powder magazine, chapel, and other buildings framed the parade ground. Many of these structures remain. While no enemy stormed the beaches, the Presidio, along with Alcatraz Island, maintained the peace in northern California and stood prepared to defend California's gold for the Union treasuries.

In the postwar years army engineers constructed massive, new batteries on the Presidio's headlands. The 1870s saw the post's artillery batteries marching off to engage in more Indian campaigns, including the Great Sioux War, the Nez Perce War, the Bannock War, and the disastrous (for both the Army and the Indians) Modoc War. At home, the U.S. Treasury Department had a Marine Hospital constructed on the Presidio in 1875 to care for sick and injured merchant seamen from all nations who landed in American ports. It performed its mission of mercy for over a century, finally closing its doors in 1981. The Presidio held a massive celebration in 1876 on the occasion of the nation's centennial birthday. More than 100,000

spectators gathered on its hills to watch military and naval drills and maneuvers.

The post's importance grew significantly in 1878 when the Military Division of the Pacific, Maj. Gen. Irvin McDowell commanding, moved its headquarters from downtown San Francisco to the Presidio. For the next eight years it served as the nerve center for all operations on the West Coast. Congress's refusal to appropriate funds for a suitable headquarters building eventually forced the division to return to the city.

In 1884 the Presidio's post cemetery became the San Francisco National Cemetery, containing the graves of the known and unknown of all ranks. For one hundred years, 1890-1990, the Fort Point Life Saving Station in the lower Presidio carried out its mission of promoting boating safety, search and rescue, and aids to navigation. In the latter year the U.S. Coast Guard moved the operation to a new station across the bay at Fort Baker.

By 1890 the last of the Indian wars were fought and the frontier declared closed. The U.S. Army closed down its many small, remote posts in the West and built up fewer but larger permanent installations, including the Presidio. Between 1890 and 1910, the garrison's strength increased fourfold. Beginning in the 1890s, the Presidio's cavalry troops assumed responsibility of protecting Yosemite and Sequoia national parks.

Beautification of the reservation began in the 1880s with the planting of a forest on the ridges and in the western part of the reservation. At the turn of the century, the U.S. Department of Agriculture was invited to have its experts assist in further beautification work on the reservation, already famous for its magnificent vistas of the coastal headlands and the Pacific Ocean.

Beginning in the 1890s, the Army undertook a vast program to modernize the coastal defenses of the nation's harbors. At San Francisco there emerged a new system of defense that included rifled guns and mortars and the facilities for planting submarine minefields. Engineers constructed these new works on both sides of the Golden Gate including the Presidio where no fewer than eighteen batteries crowned the heights. Fort Winfield Scott in the western portion of the reservation became a separate coast artillery post in 1912. By the eve of World War II it housed the headquarters for all the Harbor Defenses of San Francisco.

In 1898 the United States went to war with Spain. The Presidio became an assembly area for thousands of volunteers and regulars who embarked for duty in the Philippine Islands. Later, it served for a time as the demobilization point for returning veterans and for the training of recruit replacements for Hawaii and the Philippines. This increase in troop activity resulted in the Army establishing Letterman General Hospital, one of the more important army hospitals in the system. In World War II it became the debarkation hospital for the Pacific Ocean area. In 1945 no fewer than 72,000 wounded and sick patients passed through its doors.

Early in the twentieth century two men prepared plans for the further development of the Presidio: the much respected architect Daniel H. Burnham, and army engineer Maj. William W. Harts. While the plans of neither were fully implemented, both influenced future developments including Mission Revival architecture in place of standard army plans, landscaped drives such as the Park-Presidio Boulevard, and a graceful layout of buildings along contour lines in place of the traditional straight lines encompassing a parade.

All such plans came to a temporary halt in 1906 when a large earthquake hit San Francisco. Little damaged, the Presidio swiftly became the headquarters for the relief of the stricken city. Soldiers patrolled the burning streets and guarded the city treasury. Refugee camps sprang up on the reservation. Letterman opened its doors to the injured.

In 1915 the Panama-Pacific International Exposition thrilled visitors to San Francisco's waterfront. A portion of the exposition stood on the Presidio's low land facing the bay. This area, long the site of swamps, ponds, and tidal water, became firm, dry land by dredging and filling. War in Europe brought the exposition to an early close and when the United States entered World War I in 1917, this area became a mobilization camp called North Cantonment. Even before then, in 1914, Brig. Gen. John J. Pershing had organized and trained the Eighth Infantry Brigade at the Presidio for duty on the Mexican border and the subsequent Mexican Punitive Expedition.

The Army's headquarters for the Pacific Slope, now called the Ninth Corps Area and commanded by Maj. Gen. Hunter Liggett, returned to the Presidio from San Francisco in 1920, this time with the intention to stay. It established its offices in an imposing, concrete, three-story barracks on the main

parade. A year later the Army Air Service established Crissy Field in the lower Presidio, the first and only air defense station on the West Coast. For the next fifteen years Crissy Field assisted the Coast Artillery Corps in the training of its companies in target practice. It also assisted in the origins of the U.S. Air Mail Service, carried out aerial forest fire patrols, successfully handled aerial photographic assignments, promoted an interest in aviation on the West Coast, and participated in community activities.

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, the Works Progress Administration contributed substantially to both the Presidio and Fort Winfield Scott, constructing new buildings such as the War Department theater and bringing the road systems up to standard. The Ninth Corps Area also assumed administrative and supply support for the Civilian Conservation Corps camps in the western states. Construction of the Golden Gate Bridge and its approach roads during this decade also impacted the military reservation, usually benefitting it with the construction of new facilities, such as the central reserve ammunition magazine at Fort Scott.

The Japanese attack on U.S. military installations in Hawaii resulted in the establishment of the Western Defense Command at the Presidio. During the months following the attack the possibility of an enemy force landing on the West Coast or Alaska seemed possible and the Presidio played a key role in organizing a defense. Although the fear of invasion lessened after the U.S. Navy's victory at the Battle of Midway in June 1942, the Western Defense Command remained on the alert for the duration of the war.

With the coming of peace, the Presidio became the headquarters of the Sixth U.S. Army. Among its early commanders were such outstanding wartime leaders as Gen. Joseph W. Stilwell, Gen. Mark W. Clark, and Gen. Albert C. Wedemeyer. Its responsibilities included providing defense for the western United States and the training of ROTC, National Guard, and Army Reserve units throughout the far west. By the end of the 1950s, the Presidio employed about 10,000 people, both military and civilian. In addition to Sixth Army headquarters the Presidio itself became a part of the network of combat-ready army installations under the U.S. Army Forces Command.

Postwar construction brought significant improvement in housing for the post's military families. Recreational activities expanded with the construction of clubs, a gymnasium, golf course improvements, library, and bowling alleys. Letterman expanded into new facilities and became the Letterman Army

Medical Center. Associated with the hospital but in separate facilities, the Letterman Army Institute of Research specialized in such work as researching in the fields of artificial blood, laser surgery, and resuscitation.

In 1989 the U.S. Congress approved a report that had recommended the closure of the Presidio of San Francisco, thus paving the way for the grand old post to become part of the National Park System. Spain had founded the Presidio in 1776. Mexico surrendered it in 1848. The U.S. Army had occupied it since 1847, more than 140 years of national expansion, through large and small wars, and the evolution of military science from smoothbore guns to guided missiles. On October 1, 1994, a formal ceremony marked the transition of the Presidio of San Francisco from the United States Army to the National Park Service. The Sixth U.S. Army was inactivated on September 30, 1995. More than eighty years ago Major Harts wrote that the Presidio possessed great natural beauty and that probably no other military post in all the world had a more magnificent location and commanding position. And so it is described in the year of 1995.